

OPEN AND SHUT?

Tuesday, March 22, 2011

Of Citizenship and Software

What is the role, purpose and point of software? Most people might assume that question to have an obvious answer: as the [Berkman Center for Internet & Society](#) puts it, software is "the programs or other 'instructions' that a computer needs to perform specific tasks. Examples of software include word processors, e-mail clients, web browsers, video games, spread sheets, accounting tools and operating systems."

What this description omits of course is human agency, which ultimately determines what software does, how it does it, the degree to which it supports or undermines the rules and laws of society, and how it encourages or discourages ordinary citizens to participate in the process of defining those rules and laws.

Lawrence Lessig came to understand the power of software to construct and shape our world when he was (briefly) "[special master](#)" during the [Microsoft antitrust case](#). As he later [put it](#) to me, "[Y]ou can code software however you want, to produce whatever kind of product you want. And that capability is unique with software: you can't, for instance, say that an automobile will be something that is a transmission and a radio wrapped in one. But you can do exactly that with software, because software is so plastic."

As such, he added, the Microsoft case was just "a particular example of a more general point about how you need to understand the way in which technology and policy interact."

Yet, as more and more of our lives are organised and controlled by computers, and the role that software plays in society becomes increasingly central, most people still assume that the virtual world that opens up before them when they switch on the computer, and the choices they are offered onscreen, is how things are and ought to be — not a consequence of the way in which the underlying software has been coded.

Most of us now realise that there are bad guys in cyberspace — people who will try to steal your identity, or harass you in some way — but we too often fail to understand that the computer-generated world we enter, and what it does and does not allow us to do, has been specifically constructed to behave in that way. It is not the way things inevitably have to be, but the way someone has decided to code the underlying software. Importantly, how software is written also has a direct impact on our lives, and the world we inhabit off-screen.

For that reason the software choices that individuals, companies, organisations and governments make have important political, economic and social consequences for us all.

Yet when we attend a basic computer course we are instructed how to point and click, how to send and receive email and, perhaps, how to create a simple database — but we are not told why our choice of software is important, why it is imperative to insist that our governments and political administrators use open data formats, and why software raises important ethical issues.

Importantly, it is not made clear to us that we can challenge the way in which software is written and used.

Frustrated by the limits and inadequacies of most computer courses [Marco Fioretti](#), a former telecom engineer based in Rome who teaches about digital rights issues, has added to his repertoire a basic online course on digital citizenship.

The course, which is open to everybody, will not teach students how to code, or send email, says Fioretti, but how computers impact on and determine what happens in the real world and how, by means of active citizenship, we can help shape and influence that process, and create a more democratic world as a result. As he puts it, "Understanding digital issues is no longer optional for citizens. It's necessary whether one likes computer or not."



Tweets by @RickyPo



Richard Poynder
@RickyPo

New Zealand Royal Society Is Investigating Academics For Defending Science
scoop.co.nz/stories/PO2111...

11m



Richard Poynder
@RickyPo

English regulator investigates Sussex over Kathleen Stock exit
timeshighereducation.com/news/english-r... via @timeshighered

English regulator i...
Office for Students ...
timeshighereducati...

The State of
Open Access
Predatory publishing
Institutional Repositories
Green OA Gold
OA Self-archiving
Copyright
Basement Interviews
OA Interviews

- Home
- About Richard Poynder
- Blog: *Open and Shut?*
- The State of Open Access
- The Basement Interviews
- Open Access Interviews
- Essays on Open Access
- Archive

Blogs, News & More:

[Interview 1: Richard Poynder](#)

[Interview 2: Richard Poynder](#)

[Interview 3: Richard Poynder](#)

[DOAJ](#)

[BASE](#)

[LENS](#)

[Digital Koans](#)

[LSE Impact Blog](#)

[Heather Morrison](#)

[The Scholarly Kitchen](#)

[Open Access India](#)

[PLoS Blogs](#)

[Redalyc](#)

[SPARC Europe](#)

[IP Watchdog](#)



Search This Blog

Popular Posts



Open Access:
"Information wants to be free?"

(A print version of this eBook is available here) Earlier this year I was invited to discuss with Georgia Institute of Technology Librarian...



P2P: The very core of the world to come
In the first part of this interview Michel

Bauwens, the creator of The Foundation for P2P

OA Essays Open
Access in Serbia
Open Access in
India Open Access in
 Egypt **ScienceDirect**
Open Access
in California
OA in Latin
America Open
Access in the Humanities
MDPI Preprints Selecting
Reviewers **Global**
Research
Council **OA Big**
Deal **Open**
Notebook Science
Elsevier **Gates**
Foundation **OA in**
South Africa **OA in**
France **SSRN** **OA &**
the Humanities
 Timothy Gowers Harold
 Varmus **Peter**
Suber **OA in Poland**
OA Embargoes
Big Deal **Finch**
Report **Jeffrey Beall**
ALPSP **OA**
Mandates **PLOS**
Peer Review
Springer **BioMed**
Central **Free**
Software **Digital**
Preservation **Dove**
Medical **OA in Russia**
Radical **OA** **Almost** **OA**
HEFCE **Frontiers**

Below Fioretti explains the background to his course, and the thinking that lies behind it. Unsurprisingly, we learn that Fioretti has been influenced by **Richard Stallman** and the **Free Software Movement**, although he is not an uncritical fan.



Marco Fioretti

RP: Can you give me some brief background information on yourself, and your qualifications for running a course on digital citizenship?

MF: I discovered Linux and the Free Software world in the mid 90's, because I used UNIX in my daily work and I wanted to try something similar at home. I like Free Software because it's an extremely flexible computing environment. That's why about ten years ago I started to write tutorials and other articles for Linux Journal and other magazines.

Almost immediately, however, I became much more interested in the ethical side of Free Software rather than in the coding, and in all its implications for civil rights, politics, education, and social development.

For that reason I founded **RULE** in 2002 and **Eleutheros** in 2006, and it is why I joined the **OpenDocument Fellowship** and **Digistan**, and why I began giving the talks listed on the left-hand bar of my **web site**.

RP: Can you say something about RULE and Eleutheros, and their relevance to the course you have developed?

MF: As I said, what appealed to me about free Software were its ethical advantages. But as the FSF [**Free Software Foundation**] is always saying, "free as in freedom" isn't the same thing as "free as in beer". Free software is not necessarily affordable for schools, charities etc., for instance — particularly when, as is the case with several Gnu/Linux distributions, it only runs decently on new powerful computers.

RP: In other words, even where code is licensed under the General Public Licence (GPL), and software is made freely available to all, it does not mean that people can necessarily afford to use the programs built on it?

MF: Correct. So in 2002 we founded **RULE** (Run Up to Date Linux Everywhere) — with the aim of making modern Free Software easily installable and usable by non-geeks, even on very limited, refurbished hardware.

RP: And Eleutheros?

MF: In late 2005 I realized that some of the official Catholic documents about Social Communications seemed in some ways to be an endorsement of free/open digital technologies. This led to the **Eleutheros Manifesto** — which is an articulation of what I see as the **strong affinities** between Christianity, the philosophy of Free Software, and the adoption of Open Formats and Protocols.

For almost ten years I studied all these things, and wrote about them, and gave talks; and I volunteered as much as my full-time day job would allow me to. Then in 2008 the company I was working for was completely restructured, and I saw that as an opportunity to quit that kind of activity and do all these other things full time.

RP: What was your day job?

MF: I was an **ASIC/FPGA** designer for a telecom equipment manufacturer.

Anyway, soon after quitting — as a natural development — I also started to study as much as I could about Open Data. Amongst other things this led to a **report** on the topic that was published recently.

By the way, another qualification I feel I have for running a course on digital citizenship is that, although I am an advanced GNU/Linux user, and can write simple code and test hardware and software if I really have to (it was one of the things I did in my full time job), I am *not* a programmer, or a programming enthusiast.

And as I do not have to write, hack or support software to make a living, I have no direct business interest in Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) and — much more importantly — I am not obsessed with source code.

Software Freedom

RP: You are not a geek?

MF: I'm not a traditional software geek, no. And I feel that that gives me a much more balanced point of view than FSF people. While I think that almost all they say is

Alternatives, explained why he believes the var...



PLOS CEO
Alison Mudditt
 discusses new
OA agreement
 with the
University of

California

The Public Library of Science (PLOS) and the University of California (UC) have today announced a two-year agreement designed to make...



The Open
Access
Interviews:
Publisher MDPI
Headquartered
in Basel,

Switzerland, the Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute, or more usually MDPI, is an open access publisher...



The OA
Interviews:
Taylor &
Francis'
Deborah Kahn
discusses Dove

Medical Press

Please note the postscript to this interview here The open-access publisher Dove Medical Press has a controversial past and I have writ...



The Open
Access
Interviews:
OMICS
Publishing
Group's Srinu

Babu Gedela

***Update: On August 26th 2016, the US government (Federal Trade Commission) announced that it has charged OMICS with making false claims, ...



Copyright: the
immoveable
barrier that
open access
advocates
underestimated

In calling for research papers to be made freely available open access advocates promised that doing so would lead to a simpler, less cos...



Robin Osborne
on the state of
Open Access:
Where are we,
what still needs
to be done?

One of a series exploring the current state of Open Access (OA), the Q&A below is with Robin Osborne, Professor of Ancient History a...



Community
Action
Publishing:
Broadening the
Pool

We are today seeing growing dissatisfaction with the pay-to-publish model for open access. As this requires authors (or their funders or ins...

right, their way of *communicating* it — their language and style — isn't sufficient for a world where almost all computer users couldn't care less about programming.

RP: Who do you expect to take your course?

MF: The important point to note is that this is not a technical course: It is a citizenship course. As such, it will in my opinion be particularly useful for (university) students, parents and teachers: that is people who are preparing themselves for the new world as it is being shaped by digital technologies, or people with a responsibility to prepare future generations for the new environment.

RP: So would it be accurate to call it a digital citizen course based on the ethical precepts and beliefs of the Free Software Movement?

MF: Certainly the course will run on Free Software; and the content will probably be put online with some form of Creative Commons licence (not that it really matters, because there will be little content: it will mainly consist of discussions and other activities that happen *during* the course).

But it would not be accurate to say that it is based on the ethical precepts and beliefs of the Free Software Movement, for several reasons.

While I appreciate the FSF "precepts and beliefs", for instance, I feel less strongly than they do, or differently, about software freedom. For me the first software freedom is the freedom to ignore what software others use — even if they are using proprietary software. I'd be happier if they were also using Free Software, but hey, I respect their decision — because it doesn't limit my freedom. There are exceptions of course, but that's a separate issue.

RP: So you don't try to hector people into using Free Software in the way that some Free Software advocates do?

MF: I don't. The important thing is that if you and I communicate by means of entirely open file formats and digital standards then so far as I am concerned we are operating in a "free as in freedom" way.

And if you think about it, that is what always happened with that very advanced communication technology known as "pen and paper," and using the "free as in a freedom" alphabet: if we were doing this interview in the old way, would you care what brand of pen I was using? Would you *need* to care?

Another reason why the course isn't really based on what the FSF fights for is that it deals with much more — including areas where software licenses are totally irrelevant: social networking for instance, where the problem with services like Facebook is what they do with your data, not whether they run free or proprietary software.

RP: Privacy issues for instance?

MF: Yes. The course also deals with democracy. And here I would note that you can build the perfect police state using only "free as in freedom" software, if citizens allow you do so. Likewise we look at the effectiveness of Open Data in providing transparency in politics, which has nothing to do with software licenses. And so the list could go on.

Software embedded in citizenship

RP: What specifically will those who take the course learn?

MF: The course provides answers to questions like:

= What's the real problem with e-voting?

= What is the impact of open digital standards on pollution and **smart-grids** that may lessen our dependence on fuels from foreign not-so-stable-and-peaceful countries?

= How much simpler and more transparent government and politics could be if we all used computers in the right way

= Where should I stop when sharing my personal life online?

= How can open computing and data offer me better job opportunities — even if I am completely unable to program, and have no interest in it?

RP: You will nevertheless be dealing with basic technical issues like file formats I think. How will you teach about such things in ways that other basic computer skills courses do not? How exactly will the technology be embedded



Open Access:
What should
the priorities be
today?

This year marks
the 15 th
anniversary of the Budapest
Open Access Initiative
(BOAI), the meeting that led
to the launch of the open
acce...

Blog Archive

2020 (4)

2019 (7)

2018 (20)

2017 (18)

2016 (14)

2015 (18)

2014 (13)

2013 (32)

2012 (43)

2011 (22)

December (1)

October (2)

September (2)

August (2)

July (1)

June (5)

May (2)

March (4)

Of Citizenship
and Software

The Demise of
the Big Deal?

PLoS ONE,
Open Access,
and the
Future of
Scholarly...

PLoS ONE,
Open Access,
and the
Future of
Scholarly...

February (1)

January (2)

2010 (20)

2009 (22)

2008 (14)

2007 (9)

2006 (27)

2005 (31)

2004 (2)

Followers

in the citizenship?

MF: First of all thanks for the "technology embedded in citizenship" definition, I think I'm going to "steal" it as one of the points of the course; it's exactly one of the things I hope to help people to understand.

But yes, Part 1 of the course explains just what file formats and other concepts are, and how they are tied to citizenship. As an example of how I will deal with this you could take a look at [slides 8-13](#) of my seminar on file formats.

By the way, another very large class of people that sorely and urgently need specific, and adequate, education of the kind provided by this course are people in the religious establishment — be they priests, rabbis, vicars, imams or whatever. Being Catholic I see plenty of examples of the need for this (plus some exceptions of course) in the Catholic Church — but the need is general within all religions.

RP: Why do you say that?

MF: My position is that religious people of whatever religion have even *more* reason to learn and practice what I teach in this course than ordinary citizens. Although I am not suggesting for a minute that you have to be religious in order to learn and practice certain things — like the fact that, as you very well put it, "technology is embedded in citizenship".

This is like avoiding sneezing in the face of others to avoid spreading diseases, or not driving when drunk. Religious precepts add one extra dimension to it (you'll not go to Heaven if you violate these rules because you harm other people), but you surely don't need that dimension to see why those rules are good. As long as you are told that such rules exist.

RP: I am not sure I fully understand: Are you saying that because Free Software has been defined as an ethical issue — and I think you are suggesting that the other things you cover on your course also have an ethical component — anyone who is religious has a special duty to study these things, and live by the ethics?

MF: First of all, I would turn it the other way around: anyone who is religious has *already* chosen as his or her special duty to follow some kind of ethical system in all spheres of life. If that system includes (as is normally the case, isn't it?) values like community, respect, reciprocal support and so on, then using Free Software, or at least Free as in Freedom file formats, is just a natural consequence; something that should happen even if [Richard Stallman](#), GNU and the FSF didn't exist.

But all this comes before even looking at religion, and is much more general than Free Software. Religious people may have extra reasons to come and take this course, but the course is not about software and religion.

In general, digital technology creates or limits both habits (that is culture and visions of the world!) and possibilities for concrete action in countless, often unnoticed ways. Consequently, it gives us huge potential to do good or bad. Deciding what to make of it is an ethical decision. What people decide after the course according to their ethics is their responsibility. My goal is to make them realize that there are decisions to take, so they had better be conscious ones.

Let me stress again that this is *not* a technical course or, more exactly, the topics are not technical ones — because this has a direct, very practical implication: if this were a "software for dummies" course, parents, as well as students and teachers in unrelated fields like pedagogy, social/ political/ environmental sciences etc. would be justified in ignoring it. But the topics encompass the impact of software on human rights, education, equal opportunities, privacy.

Political element

RP: Why do you think such a course is necessary?

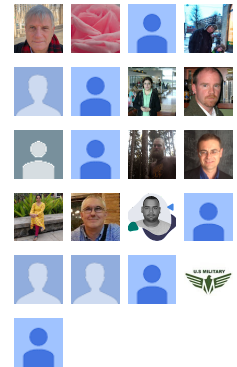
MF: Because almost all the initiatives with similar names I've met so far don't deal with such questions.

RP: What are the limitations you see in other courses?

MF: Well, for example, they limit themselves to the purely technical, monkey-training level e.g. how to send an email, click on an icon, push that button etc. Take a look, for instance, at the ECDL [[European Computer Driving Licence](#)] and you will see what I mean.

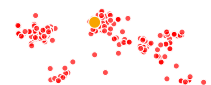
Non-technical courses, on the other hand, almost always only provide useful, but very superficial, "social, digital survival" skills. Things like "What to do in order not to

Followers (117) [Next](#)



[Follow](#)

1,611 Pageviews
Oct. 17th - Nov. 17th



Open & Shut? by [Richard Poynder](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.0 UK: England & Wales License](#).

Permissions beyond the scope of this license are available [here](#)

be harassed online"; or, "This is how you tweet, or start your own blog, and why you should do it". In other words, they are always based on the assumption that the current mainstream view of "being digital" that we see on the TV is *the* only way.

RP: *So they are more concerned with how one can be a fashionable without getting into trouble, rather than making ethical choices?*

MF: Honestly, I don't know. Whatever the reason is, the common assumption is that they will accept uncritically that the first thing you see when you fire up a computer and go online is the only way things should be, without stopping to figure out *what* it really is, what it *means* and if there are better alternatives. They tell you what an iPad is, not how to use it in *your* interest and for the common good.

Finally, when these other courses do mention Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) their approach tends to be limited to the canonical and (in my view) very restricted Stallman /FSF point of view and attitude — although one important (UK-based) exception is www.theingots.org. However, they are aimed at younger students, and have a different focus.

RP: *You said earlier that you deal with democracy; and you said that you became interested in "the ethical side of Free Software and in all its implications for civil rights, politics, education, social development." How then would you define the ethical issues implicit in your course?*

MF: Perhaps a good summary would be an expanded version of my standard slogan: today your own civil rights, the quality of your life, and the quality of life of everybody you care about, depend on how software is used around you. If you care about doing good to yourself, and to others — or at least about not making everybody's life more complicated than it could be — then (among other things, of course) you need to understand how software works. That is what the course is for.

RP: *Essentially, you are saying that your course has a political element to it. How would you define the political element?*

MF: Yes, there surely is a political element here. Otherwise I wouldn't insist so much that this is a "citizenship" course, instead of a technical one. However, the political vision that I propose and explain in this course is really limited to this concept: today software and digital technologies are, for all practical purposes, legislation. They make politics. Therefore they are too important to be left to specialists: the general criteria regulating (or not) their usage should be the product of conscious political decisions taken by all citizens, in discussion with their representatives. The point is that they can participate in those decisions without being specialists.

RP: *Can you expand on that?*

MF: Let me take as an example a very hot topic here in Italy, and in other European countries too right now: should water be privatized? Put that question to anyone in the street and they will have, and will give you, a strong opinion on the matter. Try then to suggest that their opinion (whatever it is) doesn't deserve any consideration because they aren't professional hydraulic engineers. How do you think they will respond to that?

The political component of the course I plan to run will be to explain to people how and why it is in their interest to approach questions like "should file formats be privatized" in the same way (even if they do prefer proprietary software), without delegating the decision to specialists.

RP: *What you say about the role of software in modern society sounds very like the argument made by Lawrence Lessig in his book **Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace**. In that book Lessig argues that a network is free or restrictive depending on how the software that makes it work is coded, because the software architecture underlining the network influences people's behaviours, and the values they adopt. Consequently, how software is written can affect free speech, privacy and other political freedoms in cyberspace. As Lessig put it to me when I interviewed him, "there is no such thing as the Net. What there is is a bunch of people who write code that defines the Net ... [and] ... it is not clear that commerce or the government — which is pretty significant in its role of defining the Net — would define a Net that protected the values that most people would feel should be central."*

However, I think you are taking this a step further, and saying that in the digital world more and more of our lives is now managed and controlled by software. As such, this is not just a question of how the Net is constructed, and what its architecture allows in terms of freedoms, but that how most software is coded will likely have political and social consequences.

MF: Yes, it is *not* just a question of how the Net is constructed. There is much more

in our lives than the Net. E-voting, for instance, e-waste and long-term digital State Archives (that is, the memory of nations) are just three of the cases presented in the course that are heavily influenced by how software and digital standards are regulated — but in ways that depend very little or nothing on how the Net is constructed.

Benefits but also dangers

RP: *I infer from what you say, and from reading the description of your course, that you believe the digital environment offers us significant benefits, but also dangers.*

MF: Sure. Consider that software and digitized data are the *only* things that are *always* present in *all* the other things and services we build and use today — from health to taxes; and from weapons and cars to everyday gadgets. In order to live together we need to manage these data, and today it is software that is used to generate, analyse, access and distribute all possible data and metadata.

RP: *As such the issue is not just about how systems are constructed, but how data is managed and mingled, and indeed the degree of control that individuals have over their own data?*

MF: It has always been so. [Bernard Stiegler](#) says that "the production of metadata has been the principal activity of those in power from the time of the proto-historical empires right up to today".

RP: *Can you expand on that, and its relevance to your course?*

MF: Software and open digital standards can either help people to produce, share and use data (=power, freedom, self-reliance) together, or it can be used to restrict their access to the same things in a much more sophisticated way than in the past, just because they are so ubiquitous.

This is where the actual benefits and dangers of the digital revolution are. But this awareness is still largely missing from people outside hacker circles and (some little parts of) academia. With this course I hope to help people to see the *existence* of these issues, and motivate them to know more, and to act on that knowledge.

RP: *Some might be confused by your use of the term metadata here, particularly in connection with the Stiegler quote you cite.*

MF: Metadata means "data about data" or "data that explains the meaning and the relationships between other, apparently unrelated, data". As an example, consider a spread sheet containing a city budget: The actual numbers in that file are budget data. That file, however, also contains formulas that link those numbers to each other, a timestamp of the exact moment when the file was last modified or printed. And the database that stores that file may keep a record of everybody who read or modified that file, and when and how they did so.

These are all metadata, and when it comes to accountability, and who is responsible for errors in the budget, they are much more important than the actual numbers. Moreover, this is not a theoretical example. In one of the [chapters](#) of my Open Data report I link to, and explain, a 2009 Court ruling in Arizona about a very similar situation.

RP: *I think people tend to assume that metadata are a product of the computer age but, as you indicate, their use is not new. Thinking again of the Stiegler quote, can you give me an example of the historical importance of metadata, and how they have been used to attain or assert power?*

MF: The first examples that come to mind are associated with maps. A map is and has always been both a) a declaration of power and political statement (because it declares how the world is in the mind of the mapmaker — [Map or be mapped](#), as the [Mapping Hacks](#) book from O'Reilly puts it) and, b) a source or container of essential metadata.

In past centuries, every king would know that he would become rich if he could go get gold from the Incas, or spices from Indonesian islands. But in order to actually do it, to just *attempt* such a move, he would have to have the maps — that is, the knowledge of how to get safely from here to there and back.

So a map shows and contains metadata — not just the names of places and what they produce, but the way they are related on the Earth's surface, their relative positions, and any obstacles in between. That's metadata about those places.

We should note that maps were always kept secret. [This page](#) says it well: maps have always been really helpful, but especially 400 years ago. Maps were a secret

source of power then. If you had one, you understood where you were in the world and you realised where you were going.

Not everyone knew that. But the Dutch did. They knew where America, Africa and the Far East were. In the 17th century mapmakers in Holland ruled the world.

At the same time, note, smuggling maps out of Spain became punishable by death. It's easy to see why: Spain was shipping unimaginable amounts of gold and silver out of the Americas. In 1628 when the Dutch hijacked a Spanish galleon loaded with Peruvian silver, Spain was almost bankrupt for a year.

Making the world a better place

RP: *Ok, so access to metadata has always been important, and has always had economic, social and political connotations. What is different in the digital age perhaps is that so much more of what is important in life is determined by metadata, so we need open access and open data standards. What would you say were the specific promises and dangers for individuals in the new digital era?*

MF: The promise of this era is disintermediation: you still delegate others to do some things for you (be they bankers, travel agents or MPs) but (if you know the right things) you can get by with a great deal fewer intermediaries, and you can control what's happening much better than in the past. The danger lies in continuing to delegate too much to others, just because it's much easier now than before we had computers.

RP: *So the course is not so much about how to protect your privacy online, or how to avoid identity theft, but a democratic message about the need for citizens to make their representatives more accountable, and to take more responsibility on themselves. Does it perhaps also imply some scepticism about representative democracy?*

MF: I may be wrong, but I suspect that I like representative democracy much more than lots of software geeks and other people interested in "digital citizenship" matters.

This may seem to contradict what I said about disintermediation, but I think Einstein got it right when he said "Make everything as simple as possible, but not simpler". In a modern society there are too many details to have the time to decide everything directly, and many of those decisions require specific technical, uncommon skills. So representative democracy is OK for me, as long as there is much, much more transparency and efficiency in than there is today.

Technically, this is possible only with digital technologies, which we already have. Politically, it won't happen unless the majority of people realize how those technologies work. This is another reason to attend the course.

RP: *As you indicated earlier, ensuring that politicians and others with power over our lives are transparent requires active citizenship. Is there a danger that most people today have allowed ourselves to become too infantilised to take up the challenge? Do not most of us now prefer to let someone else take the decisions, and then blame them when things go wrong?*

MF: That was already happening before the Internet. Surely, many people prefer to let others decide for them and then take the blame if needed. I'd imagine that we *all* behave that way, at least in certain moments or on certain issues ("should I trust my car mechanic and only buy original spare parts or not?").

RP: *What is your motivation for putting on this course?*

MF: My motivation for introducing this course, and the other things I do, is to make a decent living by contributing to making the world a better place, in a way that I feel I can do well.

RP: *Can you give me an example of how you would hope someone would do things differently after doing the course, and how doing it differently could benefit them directly?*

MF: For example, people will hopefully come to realize why and how they (and their public administrations!) can generate much less e-waste — by, for instance, replacing their computers only when it's actually necessary, not when some software manufacturer decides to increase its dividends.

And I hope they will have the basic skills to understand whether the computer classes run by their son's school are providing useful or useless skills.

And I hope they will look around their hometown and see many ways in which open data and the smart use of computers can improve services and/or reduce local taxes — by asking their mayor or local representatives the right questions.

In practice

RP: How will the course work in practice? I am assuming it will all take place online, and will be highly interactive?

MF: Yes, the course is all done online, but it would certainly be possible to run special editions of the course in person.

Anyway, each unit starts with a short list of things to read and/or a short online slideshow to introduce the topic (for example, "What is e-waste, how bad exactly is it, and how is it dependent on personal software choices?"). Then there are multiple choice tests — not to give scores, but to allow everybody to personally verify how much they understood of the reading material.

At that point, the interesting (and, for the students, the most valuable) part starts: Discussing together, with my coordination and assistance, the case studies provided, with students trying to explain them in their own words, providing specific examples from their own experience and locales, and asking and getting advice from each other about what to do in practice to solve related problems.

It is this last part that makes the difference. A short time spent in this way, stimulating and helping each other, working on one thing at a time, can make people understand the issues much more clearly, and much more quickly, than a month spent reading random stuff found online on the same topics, or discussing it in some forum where (even ignoring trolls, flame wars and the like) there will surely be much less focus.

RP: I believe you plan to charge seven Euros per student. How many students do you envisage recruiting? Presumably you will want to get sufficient numbers to ensure that those Euros add up to a viable revenue stream?

MF: I am doing my best to *not* envisage any number of students. If I think too much about that, I may just give up.

Somebody asked me "Why don't you just get a sponsor to pay you to prepare the material and then give the course for free?" The answer is very simple: it wouldn't be sustainable. This is not a "fire and forget" project like writing a book and letting it loose.

Collecting and organizing the material is something I would do anyway to write articles, and give talks etc. The real value of a course is direct interaction with the tutor and other students, not getting stuff to read. I have already tutored online courses, so I do have an idea of where the value is and what kind of work is involved.

At least in the medium/long term in a good course the amount of work/effort/time spent by the tutor is directly proportional to the number of students, not to how many slides or papers the tutor had to prepare. Therefore, the compensation *must* be proportional to the number of students. Otherwise I can't afford it, it's as simple as that.

My other courses are *much* more expensive than 7 Euros per person, because they last longer, go into much more detail, have much smaller potential audiences. I want to offer this course to the greatest possible number of people, even in developing countries, because it's the basic stuff that everybody should know. So it must be a per-person fee, but that has to be the lowest possible one. Time will tell if 7 Euros is sustainable. For now, it's a good start.

RP: What are the prerequisites to participate?

MF: The main prerequisite is time: since the course works as I described, it will do you very little good if you can't find the time to participate as much as possible to the discussions during the whole course. But the great advantage of an online course done in a non-real time way is just that it is immensely easier for everybody to find that time. Apart from that, if you can use any browser and have any computer or smartphone connected to the Internet, you already have all the skills and equipment it takes to participate. This is an introductory course about the real impact of computers on our lives, not a class for some engineering degree.

RP: Thanks for your time, and good luck with the course!

Further details of Fioretti's course can be found [here](#).

Posted by Richard Poynder at [13:15](#)



Labels: [Free Software](#), [Open Source](#)

1 comment:



Marco F. said...

(sorry if this is a duplicate, I had a browser crash). Thanks to Richard for helping me to explain very well what I am trying to do with this course.

[March 23, 2011 9:58 am](#)

[Post a Comment](#)

[Newer Post](#)

[Home](#)

[Older Post](#)

Subscribe to: [Post Comments \(Atom\)](#)

Website maintained by [NARKAN](#). Powered by [Blogger](#).